Beauty's Secret.

BY ALLAN MUIR.

[Commenced Sunday, May 2.]

The virtue of the Dones being not of Mrs. Barbara Temple's kind—piety and charity could not make her regard anybody with favor—and their origin and manner being plain, she had never liked them. Indeed, at home—she would not ridicule people in company—she would sometimes say to her daughters that nothing could ever be made of those glorified trades people. Then, with a characteristic dread of a too sweeping assertion, she would add: "Except sometimes, dears—except sometimes." "You know, girls," she said one day, in her gay style, "it is a proverb that there is nothing like leather; I don't think there is." Which she delivered with one of her Frenchified faces of dislike, which always set the girls laughing. The plain Dones dreaded the witty, dashing, fashionable Mrs. Barbara Temple; and Mrs. Barbara Temple regarded the plain Dones with repressed, but not invisible, scorn.

There were John Dons the first, and John Done the second. As is very often the case with sons of self-made men, John Done, junior, while lacking his father's native sense and business energy, had inherited a double portion of his homeliness, made quite intolerable by a brassy assurance and a disregard of other people's feelings, which indeed amounted to an anxiety to inflict pain wherever he could. At school he had been hated for a tyrant and a bully, and it was also known among the boys that he would tell a lie—and that not a schoolroom lie—whenever it suited his game. Percival Brent went to school with him, being just three years his junior. Percival was a bright, merry little boy, very well put together, and everybody's favorite, only that Done, who always disliked a boy in proportion to his school popularity or his educational promise, never lost an opportunity of tyrannizing over him. One day, when they were all in the playground, Done, in making a high jump, fell very awkwardly, and, amidst the roar of laughter which followed, little Brent ran forward and made a pretense of smoothing the ground after the overthrow of the weighty Done. Exasperated by his fall, Done dashed forward and gave little Brent such a box on the ear as sent him spinning round, until he fell heavily to the ground. Brent sprang up, all knit into compactness with rage, and tried to give Done a blow on the face, which he scornfully warded off, and told the little lad not to be so impudent again. But Brent, bristling and stamping with passion, declared he would have a fight for it; which Done at first refused, for all the boys cried out at the idea. But as the little fellow would not be appeased, Done, having satisfied his honor by one refusal, and always liking to inflict pain, accepted the challenge, and the two stripped to their shirts and went at it. For several rounds little Brent was knocked all over the place; and they all felt for the game little lad, but were sorry to see him so punished, and especially in a hopeless fight. For my lady readers will observe that one of the crowning achievements in the noble art is to imprint your fist on your opponent's face. Now if your arms are only two feet long, while those of your opponent are three feet, it will follow that while he may be scarcely hammering your countenance into ruin, your return blows may fall only on the unoffending air. This was just what happened now; and poor little Brent was having a very dispiriting time of it. Some of the boys, however, noticed that he went down wonderfully easy; and others, who knew that the rector's groom was one of the best pair of fists in the county, began to think that perhaps the little fellow had picked up some of the tactics from Bobby "Miller," and was trying a waiting game. Done thought so, too; and being a large mealy boy, with rather uncertain wind, he resolved to bring the thing to an end, and gave Brent one savage blow, which produced very disagreeable results on the poor little man's nose. Brent was not knocked out of it, however, as Done hoped; but the very opposite. He was strung together with fury; but even in his rage he did not forget the instructions of his master, Bobby "Miller." He rushed at Done; and, while the other in his magnificence was guarding himself carelessly, little Brent "got in," and began to return on Done's face all the blows he had received, principal and interest. How those little fists flew and hammered! How Done retreated over the ground, wildly trying to get his adversary outside range again, while still little Brent drubbed away with astounding rapidity and vigor! The fact was the little fox was quite fresh, while Done was thoroughly blown. Bobby "Miller" knew his business, and would have been proud of his young master had he been there to see. At last Done, nearly blind with blows and rage, made one grand effort to destroy his enemy with an appearance of ease. It was fatal to him. Brent was really warm to his work, and not likely to miss an opening. In rapid succession he managed to plant three blows fast under Done's left eye, the last delivered with such force that it sent the lumpy fellow to grass, where he lay vanquished, Brent standing over him with fists still clinched, and burning, it seemed, for a little more.

That was sixteen years ago. John Done, junior, was now a rather bulky young man, with a white flat face, very small sunken eyes, a smile which expressed a narrow mind satisfied with itself, and unprepossessing manners. His habits, too, had not been the best, and it was known in Kettlewell that he was, in his sly way, a man of dissolute habits. He had now been absent, off and on, for nearly four years; but when he returned home he happened to hear of Sophia Temple and her little affair with Percival Brent. By a curious chance he had met Brent in Australia himself, and, although outwardly civil to him, he remembered with a grudge the thrashing of years gone by; for his nature was of that sluggish sort, where revenge burns long and sullenly, like fuel in a slow combustion stove. When he came home and heard about Sophia, the thought struck him what a nice girl she was, and what a fine thing it would be to marry the woman for whom his former foe was working now in another hemisphere! He pondered. His eyes lit with their half-animal gleam. He said: "I can manage it."

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. TEMPLE DELIVERS A SERMON.

Mrs. Barbara Temple was sitting in her favorite armchair, and the sunshine of a bright October morning was shining in the room. But that pleasant light revealed clearly the signs of time, which had for long enough been more or less manifest in the old woman's face. She either did not or could not any longer dress herself with the same deceptive skill as in days gone by, and now in every feature of her face any eye could see that she was an old woman—a very old woman, indeed. She sat wrapped up carefully in a splendid Indian shawl, and a fire blazed on the hearth; and she looked cold and somewhat lifeless, although her eyes were still bright and her voice strong. Sophia, who stayed always with her, was reading The Morning Post to her, but the old woman did not listen with her accustomed attention.

"Sophy," she said at last, "I had a visit from Mrs. Done yesterday."

"Indeed, mamma," Sophia replied. She bit her lip, and so hid a smile, spirited and contemptuous, with a dash of amusement in it. "And what does Mrs. Done want, mamma?"

"She says her son is in love with you."

"Delightful, mamma!" Sophia replied, now with open amusement on her face. "So he has thrown his handkerchief at last. He may pick it up again, mamma, and put it in his pocket!"

"Now, Sophia, don't talk in that hasty, inconsiderate way," the old woman said. "In all those cases we should consider, dear, there is nothing like——"

"Leather, mamma!" Sophia cried, merrily, catching up her mother's old mocking phrase. The bright October sunshine and some whim of her own feelings had put her in good spirits that morning.

"Very pleasant, dear," the little mother remarked, shaking her head soberly. Somehow her whole style of speech was relaxing in energy; her words were pitched low; she did not speak with her former decision. Presently she said:

"You must remember young Mr. Doan was never in trade; and beside, Sophia, he will settle twenty thousand pounds on you!"

"Can't be had under forty, mamma!" Sophia seemed resolved to treat the matter in this jocular way. It was plain that she realized that she and her mother had changed positions; she was virtually mistress now; there might be argument, but no struggle of will.

"Sha'n't cry 'cherry ripe' under forty thousand pounds, mamma!" And Sophia tossed her head and looked saucy and engaging, and cheap at double the money.

"Now listen to me, Sophia," her mother said. "You will never have such another offer—from a money point of view."

"Well, mamma, I will be serious," Sophia answered, suiting her face to her words. "I would not marry that man for anything he could give me. To begin with, I know what his life has been."

"Now, my dear Sophia," her mother said, with a deprecating gesture, "I will not hear anything about his manner of life. The men are all in fault in that way."

("*One* I know is not!" Sophia tenderly thought, clasping her darling's memory to her heart.)

"All are in fault that way," continued Mrs. Temple. "Some let us know it, others manage to hide it. In fact, all are alike. And, indeed, Sophia, better marry a man who, before marriage, has—has—*seen the world*, than one who will make you unhappy after. The wilder the bachelor, the steadier the husband, so I often have found it."

"Now you don't mean it, mamma; you know you don't."

"I do mean it, indeed, dear; and, besides, whose fault is it if men are wild? Ours, my dear; ours alone. We are so fond of conquest and impression that we never leave them alone. We get them into the habit of mind, dear. Have I not watched women? More especially if a man is at all celebrated, we long to make an impression. All women do. My dear Sophia, the greatest prude that ever lived is pleased if she hears that a celebrated man admires her. Be he married or single, she will not care; she had rather have the tribute of admiration than not have it. O, Sophia, we are quite as much to blame as the men. We all like to have them at our feet; I liked it myself, dear!"

"Mamma!"

"When they are celebrated, dear, remarkable, worth catching, you know."

"What is Mr. Done celebrated for?" Sophia asked, scornfully.

"Money, dear. As good a thing as any other. Some men are conspicuous for fortune, others for looks, others for talent, others for family. But when a man is conspicuous for anything, women like to have his admiration, and that is how half the men are spoiled, dear; we do it ourselves. Why, even if a man is conspicuous for virtue, most of us would like to bring him to the ground—to have him sigh for us only once; and then we can toss our heads and be as good as we please. Our vanity is gratified."

"Now, mamma," Sophia said, rather shocked at this speech, and not knowing whether her mother was serious or not, but resolved to treat it as jocular, "this is only your merry way; do be serious."

"I will, dear, if you will be serious, too."

"There—I am serious now."

"Very well, then. Try and make up your mind to marry this young man. Twenty thousand pounds, Sophia!"

"Mamma, figures would not write the sum that I would marry him for. He is a vulgar, selfish, odious fellow. Marry him!" Sophia shivered as when some one walks over our grave. "Call *him* husband!"

She made a grimace which her mother could not have surpassed, and which clinched the discussion.

"Very well, Sophy," the old woman said, sinking back in her armchair rather wearily, "you must have your own way. Only remember, dear, when I am gone, you had the chance of wealth and ease before I left you."

The word alarmed Sophia afresh. She was certain now of what her future would be; but she put on a bright face.

"Never mind, mamma, you are not going to leave me yet; and when you do, if all else fails, I can sew gloves at twopence a pair; but I will not marry a man the very thought of whom makes my flesh creep. Oh, mamma, mamma," Sophia cried, relapsing into gayety now that her point was won, "for making you dislike an offer, there's nothing like leather."

CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH SOPHIA'S EYES FILL WITH TEARS.

For some reason, which I cannot divine, Sophia treated the proposal of the leather merchant's son as an affront. The matter oozed out—in Kettlewell everything did ooze out sooner or later; and to one or two intimate friends who spoke to her on the subject Sophia expressed herself with a sarcasm which was, perhaps, not fair, and was certainly not prudent. Some kind friend was at the pains of telling young John Done in what terms of ridicule and contempt Sophia had mentioned his name. This gentleman in his own person does not come before us, and it is enough to say that certain disclosures which reached poor Sophia's ears about this time concerning the conduct of Percival Brent in Australia were indirectly communicated to her by her insulted admirer, who, as has been said, had met Sophia's lover when abroad.

There resided in Kettlewell a widow of good family and small fortune, by name Mrs. Hands; and Mrs. Hands, relishing the fat living of the house of Done, and the house of Done being gratified by the aroma of aristocracy which hung around Mrs. Hands, there came about an alliance between the two, offensive and defensive, which was always most enthusiastically maintained on the widow's side about lunch and dinner hour. Mrs. Hands was a woman who had seen a great deal of the world, and could converse agreeably. She had a beautiful set of teeth which made her smile a great deal, and a jolly laugh which caused people to feel comfortable, and between the laugh and the smile she had a reputation for thorough good nature. She was known in every house in Kettlewell; she carried gossip with the punctuality of a postman; she had broken off two matches by her solitary act and deed; she was a kind of parlor earthquake, making splits and fissures and shakings innumerable in hitherto stable households; and yet for all this the true character of Mrs. Hands was not suspected, and everybody said she was such a good-humored woman that it was a pleasure even to see her. Which shows, reader, what can be done with a beautiful set of teeth, and a smile and a jolly laugh discreetly inserted in the talk now and then.

Mrs. Hands was no favorite with Mrs. Temple. That prudent woman, mindful of an enemy's craft and malice, never said what she thought of the widow; but she knew, and the widow knew. In her way, Mrs. Hands feared the superior and more scientific worldling, as was shown by the contraction of her smile and the reduction of her laughter whenever Mrs. Temple was by. But Sophia liked the widow and thought she had a good heart.

One morning, about four months after the Done episode, Mrs. Hands called on Sophia; and there was to be seen on her face a remarkable solicitude and depression, so much, that Sophia asked, after a little casual talk, if anything had disturbed her.

"Disturbed me!" the widow exclaimed. "O, Sophia, my heart is bleeding this morning!"

"For what?" Sophia asked. "For anybody I know?"

"For yourself, dear girl. Now I will not keep you in suspense. Is it not true—I know it is true—that you are still in your heart keeping up with the clergyman's son, Percival Brent?"

Sophia turned as white as death. Two or three strange whispers about Percival had reached her ears from different quarters in the last three weeks.

"Have you any news of him? Is he ill?" she asked, and yet illness was not what she feared.

"Sophia, dear girl," the widow said, regarding her with eyes that absolutely moistened—by what art or emotion I know not, nor could the widow have told herself—"Percival Brent is a bad young man—unworthy of you—unworthy of your love."

"What do you mean?" Sophia asked, drawing herself up with a kind of proud rebuke, which yet had a threatening of tears in its very indignation. "Nothing bad can be true of him."

"Nothing good, Sophia," the widow replied, shaking her head religiously. "It is sad for me to tell it to you, but it is my duty, dear—and my privilege, too; for who would see you sacrificed to such a fellow?"

"You must not talk so," Sophia said, in a less resolute tone.

"In the first place, dear, he has not been successful in his trade—business, whatever you call it. He has lost everything—or the person with whom he was in partnership has lost everything, or has died, or something unlucky anyhow—Brent is nowhere at all in money matters."

"That he cannot help," Sophia said, and her heart revived.

"Perhaps not, dear; but he could help being idle, being fond of fast company, being fond of drink—or, at least, of being at places where people do drink—and all that sort of thing. This has been his ruin, for ruined he is."

"I don't see much in what you say," Sophia replied. "Whenever a young man fails in life, people are ready to blame him, and ready to say, 'What could you expect? and all that."

"Yes; but smoking, dear—drinking—fast society!"

"Well, he always smoked, and he always drank wine," Sophia answered hotly. "I suppose once he has taken a little too much, and of course spiteful people say that he drinks and has ruined himself by it."

Had she really spoken her whole mind she would have said: "One offense he has never committed—he has never been false to me; and therefore his peccadilloes shall be forgiven."

"Sophia, Sophia!" the widow exclaimed, "there is more than that. How young you are to think that such things ever go alone! Percival is—well, my dear, he is not over particular about his morals, and that's the long and short of it!"

"Tell me all you know," Sophia exclaimed, turning on her visitor almost fiercely, and with eyes that enforced an instantaneous reply.

"Well, then, my dear, he has been untrue to you."

"Married!" Sophia gasped, "to—to Bessie Warren?"

"Never heard *that* name," replied the widow. "And he is not married, but a great deal worse. He is well known out there for his liking for fast women, and he has made quite a scandal of himself with an actress—a married woman, I believe, only her husband is in England, I am told."

"How do you know all this?" Sophia asked. Her voice was scarcely audible; for she was now sure that her lover was false.

"One of my little birds told me," the widow replied, with a jauntiness that sickened poor Sophia. "Forget him, dear. Be a girl of spirit. Treat him as he deserves."

"How do you know all this?" Sophia repeated, putting her hand to her forehead and speaking in a tone of genuine anguish. "Tell me how you know it?"

"Well dear, if you must hear everything—and perhaps it is better—look here."

The widow drew from her muff a newspaper, and opening it, pointed to a marked paragraph. The paper was an Australian one, and the paragraph, as will be seen, was composed with that engaging ease and lightness of touch which are characteristic of certain colonial journals.

"CARRIAGE ACCIDENT IN THE SUBURBS.—Yesterday evening as Percival Brent was driving Mrs. Lanigan to the theatre after a pleasant lunch in the country, the horses ran away, probably having had too much Moet & Chandon—a beverage which, though it never affects the driver, is sometimes known to have an exciting effect on the steeds. After a wild career through the streets the vehicle was turned over close by the theatre and the occupants thrown into the street, after which, lightened of their load, the inebriated animals proceeded to drag the vehicle to smash with amazing celerity. Young Percival got a heavy cut on the left temple, but Mrs. Lanigan, marvelous to tell, came off wholly uninjured. In spite of his bleeding brow Percival was on his feet again in a moment and, mindful of the poet's advice, he went to Mrs. Lanigan's side, "to take her up tenderly," and "lift her with care." The news of the accident and its happy termination soon spread in the theatre, and when Mrs. Lanigan appeared on the stage the house rang with plaudits. Nobody thought of poor Percival, his countenance being of value to himself only, while Mrs. Lanigan's is dear to the public."

"A word in your ear, dear," cried the widow, when Sophia had finished.

And she whispered something at which the poor girl's cheek broke into a flame.

"Now, Sophia," she said aloud, "have I not convinced you?"

"I feel a little tired," Sophia answered. "I don't know what to think just yet. If you will excuse me, and look in another morning, I shall be glad."

"Certainly, love," the good humored widow replied, not sorry to be free now that her work was done. "Don't be cast down. It's all for the best. You will soon get a husband. Think of Mr. Prendergast, or, better still, think of that excellent young fellow, John Done. He is dying for you still; I am sure of it."

"Look in another day," Sophia said mechanically; and the widow took herself off.

Poor Sophia stood silent, just where Mrs. Hands left her, still holding the hateful paper which had stabbed her to the heart. She was numb and stupid with the blow. For this, then, she had loved and waited in uncomplaining constancy for nearly six years! Only to learn that her lover was a rake—satisfied and pleased with the caresses of a light dame like Mrs. Lanigan—unworthy of her affection, or the affection of any true woman! Had there been any excuse for him, even had it been the blaming of herself, gladly she would have pleaded it before her own judgment now. Had she been married to him she might have disappointed his expectation, and so driven him to other women for pleasure. Had they even been meeting occasionally she might not have been warm enough, charming enough; twenty excuses might have been urged on his behalf. Now the fault must have been all his own. She had kept her vow and had found the joy of her life in keeping it. If any doubt of him had crept into her mind at times she had rebuked it instantaneously. With her whole soul, morning, noon and night, and with an almost religious punctuality, she had cherished his memory, encircling it with her warmest memories and her purest prayers. And here he was exchanging her love for the favors of an actress, who sold her smiles with as quick an eye to profit as a shopman sells his wares. The downfall of Sophia's hopes was complete. The most refined ingenuity could not have discovered a more perfect and total form of torture. Her whole life was turned into a wilderness. Her mother was right. Better live for the world, better marry for money, better lay hold of material comfort and the pleasures of sense and fashion. These had no power to break and crush the heart like lofty ideas refuted by reality, and devoted hopes crushed by hard fact. With all these thoughts whirling through her brain in a struggling crowd, Sophia stood on, stony and tearless, in the center of the room, until suddenly the door was thrown open, and Mrs. Temple's maid came flying in with her cap disordered and dismay in every feature.

"Come, miss! come quick!" she called out. "Come up stairs; missus is going on so queer! O, don't lose a minute, miss, not a minute!"

BOOK SIX.

LADY BEAUTY'S JOY.

CHAPTER I.

THE TIMEPIECE OF ONE GAY LIFE BEGINS TO STRIKE THE MIDNIGHT QUARTERS.

Sophia found her mother seated on the edge of the bed pale and exhausted, but with nothing about her to account for her maid's sudden excitement. The old woman passed her hand feebly across her forehead, trying, it seemed, to collect her thoughts, and then began to speak.

"Have I been asleep? I must have been asleep! Where is Jones? Did I not see her here? O, Sophy, I have had such an odd dream! I thought there was a ball here—in this room, and yet my bed was here too and I lying on it, and between the dances a girl in a blue dress, whose face I could not see, came and sat on the bedside, and she had a lover with her, and they were toying and kissing, and then I called out something and afterward awoke. I suppose I awoke. I had not known I was asleep."

The maid subsequently told Sophia that, so far as she knew, her mistress had not been asleep at all; that all of a sudden she began to call out very loud, as if she were scolding; and that in the midst of a torrent of words she became deadly pale and seemed to faint away. Seeing this, the maid had rushed off for Sophia, and upon their return the old woman was come to herself, and sitting down as Sophia had found her. The doctor being sent for, made the usual inquiries and examinations, and ordered his patient to bed for a day or two, saying that she had overtaxed her strength; but when alone with Sophia he told her that there had evidently been an attack in the brain which might be the forerunner of something very grave, or might be only a symptom of weakness and old age.

"The latter I think," he said as he was leaving; "your mother is a very aged person, I should fancy, and her last decay has probably begun. How long she may live no one can say; but she will not be the same woman again, and the rest of her life will be going down hill, how fast or how slow depends on her constitution and our care."

"I told you, Sophy, that I felt a little shaken," the old woman said, when her daughter came back to her bedside. "Don't you remember what I said about the peach trees? A little rest, Sophy, will set me up—a little rest. I have had a hard life of it, enjoying myself; I don't feel tired of that in the least, but every one wants rest sometimes."

There followed the contraction of life which is the sure token of advancing age. Old Mrs. Temple got up late; she seldom drove out, and then only at the sunniest hours, and she had all through the day her little delicacies—turtle soup in tablespoons, champagne in tiny glasses, and all the usual dainty forms of nourishment for wasting lives. Sophia remarked, however, that her mother was more than ever solicitous about expense.

"I declare it is a sin to be eating this soup," she would say. "How much is this a quart?—a guinea, I daresay. And as to sending to Gunter's, Sophy, it is waste, sinful waste. You would get it quite as good at the confectioner's here. Fancy if I went on with champagne and turtle at this rate for a year or two, why, money would come to an end, Sophy—money would come to an end."

Everything pointed in one direction: Mrs. Temple was living on capital; and she dreaded the approaching exhaustion of her means. Sophia tried to get some knowledge of her affairs.

"Could not I do that for you, mamma?" she asked one day, as the old woman was figuring over her bank book.

"You, Sophy!" she answered, with a gleam of her former vivacity. "You, dear child! you would not know which side is which—which is the mother and which the banker."

"Let Archibald help you, then?" Sophia rejoined.

"Archibald, indeed!" the old woman exclaimed. "That great man stooping to my little bit of business would be like a camel trying to get through a needle's eye. No, thank you."

Elsewhere, too, some gleams of her old spirit broke through the clouds of weakness and illness, but Sophia, watching her narrowly, thought the vivacity only assumed. Even now she fancied she could discern a look of deeper care on the old woman's face as she returned to her calculations. Next day they drove to the bank, and feeble as Mrs. Temple was she insisted on going in alone; and she had a long interview with the manager. When she came out she showed Sophia a roll of notes.

"Two hundred and fifty pounds, Sophy," she said. "I shall put it in my drawer, and if I am not able to get out again this winter there will be money enough to go on with. I don't wish anyone to go to the bank about my business again—mind that; and you need not pay any bills just at present. What ready money is wanted we can take out of this."

All this was alarming to Sophia. She was not the girl to give way to covetousness at a time like this; but who, without uneasiness, could face the prospect of supplies perhaps suddenly cut off at the most trying juncture? As to herself, Sophia did not feel much anxiety. Had Percival continued true to her, how gladly she would have put any fortune she might have inherited into his hands to repair his loss, but now she was not interested enough in life to fear poverty. Beyond care for her mother she imagined there was nothing to live for. She had tried even after Mrs. Hands' visit to disbelieve the reports which had seemed so fatally authenticated; but the very next day Sibyl told her that she, too, had heard from another quarter the most indifferent account of Percival. At this Sophia became hopeless. It was curious that the only person to whom she said anything about her trouble was Prendergast. Whatever had passed at the time of his proposal had set up something like an intimacy between them; and one day when he called, noticing that she looked pale, he made some remark upon the trial her mother's illness must be.

"It is not, mamma," she replied; "that I could bear; but oh, I feel so weary and sick! I have heard such dreadful things about the man I believed loved me. Have you heard anything? Oh, do you believe it all?"

"I am afraid Brent has forgotten himself," Prendergast replied gravely, and said no more.

Meanwhile her sisters, with the above exception, maintained on the subject an ominous and dreary silence; and her mother, whom she carefully kept in ignorance of the reports, never mentioned Percival's name. So poor Sophia, with her broken hopes, went her dull round from day to day, nursing her mother and communing with her own sad heart, and there was not one ray of cheerfulness in her life. She grew pale and worn; and though she tried to be cheerful, every one could see that care was eating her spirit and strength away. Certainly the constrast of her appearance with that of Caroline, or even with that of Sibyl, was a warning against living for an idea in this worldly world. The other sisters might not indeed have grasped the whole substance—in this life who does? But Sophia's very shadow had vanished away, and she was quite alone, and destitute not only of pleasure but of illusion, too.

CHAPTER II.

MRS. TEMPLE DELIVERS A FAREWELL SERMON ON LIFE.

Winter darkened on apace, and while the old woman's health more visibly declined, Sophia was pained to find that she would not allow the idea of death to near her. From occasional remarks that she let fall, it seemed that Mrs. Temple was willfully maintaining this delusion of returning strength, with an undercurrent of conviction that she was to die after all. But to Sophia she always spoke as if her recovery were a certainty; and she even said one day: "Next year I shall go to Paris and the year after that to Vienna."

"Mamma," Sophia said seriously, when she heard this extraordinary speech, "next year! and the year after that! Does it never strike you how uncertain life is?"

"Of course life is uncertain," the old woman replied briskly. "I never knew the time when it was anything else. But we must make our arrangements, and then take our chance. You were taught to dance when you were seven years old, although you would not require it for nine years more, and life was as uncertain then as now. Still, it would never have done not to have taught you to dance."

"Yes, but when one is weak and sick these things seem to come nearer, don't they, mamma?" Sophia said with the greatest tenderness.

"Seem to come, Sophy! They do come nearer. I wish they did not. But that is no reason why we should bring them nearer still by our own reflections and guesses."

"But, mamma," Sophia said, now resolved to press the matter, "ought we not at such times to think a little about the other world, and prepare for it?"

"Prepare for the other world!" the old woman exclaimed, impatiently. "Tell me, how shall we do it? You talk as if one could make ready for the other world like a flower show or a ball. I don't know anything about the other world. I hope everything will be right, but there is nothing I can do."

"See a clergyman, mamma," Sophia said, growing timid before her mother's unwavering hardness. "See Mr. Knox. He is very kind, I am sure, and not the sort of man to excite you."

"Very well, Sophy," her mother retorted, getting a little flushed with excitement, but speaking with sarcastic self-repression. "Let us suppose Mr. Knox comes to see me. I can tell you what will happen. He will have a black book with him, which at first he will try to keep out of sight, and he will edge it into view as he is talking about the weather. That will be a signal to me of what is coming. Then he will begin by saying that this is a world full of pain and care and trouble." She hit off the clergyman's voice exactly, but more, it seemed, from her old habit of ridicule than from any present wish to be flippant. "If I say what I think, I shall answer, 'Not a bit of it; it is a cozy, bright world enough, and I never complained of it.' Then he will go on and talk about loving the world. 'Well,' I ought to say, 'I do love it, and never more than now when I am shut out from it.' 'Yes,' he will say, 'but people ought to be serious.' 'Serious!' I shall answer. 'Believe me, the person who produces one hearty laugh from another does good in the world. Serious, indeed! give me round faces, not long ones.' Won't this be improving talk, Sophy, and do good to me and good to Mr. Knox? Then he will talk about sickness being a blessing, and if I give him my mind I shall say that sickness is one of the few things I know which is an unmitigated bother and perplexity. Won't that make Knox whistle! He will feel he must put me down; and next he will say we are all sinners. What then? If I say the truth I shall answer: 'I don't see it. I have done my best in life. I have not been a liar, or a thief, or cruel. Enjoyment came to me and I took it, and what a fool I should have been if I had not taken it! But I have tried to be a good mother and a kind friend, and though I don't mean to say that I have not often been in fault like other people, still I have never done anything to make a fuss about. The Almighty won't judge us for mistakes and little slips of temper—that I am quite sure of. I have always gone to church when I could, and if there is any better way to heaven than that I don't know it, nor anybody else.' So please, Sophy, don't have Mr. Knox here; either I say what I do think and shock him, or I say what I don't think, which is not likely to do any good to anybody."

"But, mamma," Sophia went on, "do you never feel as if you wanted something better than this world? It is very happy and all that while it lasts; but do you never wish for another?"

"Never, Sophia!" her mother replied, now with distinct harshness in her voice. "I have told you a hundred times. I am satisfied with the world, and with other people, and with myself. I tell you I find only one fault with the world—I want it to last, and it won't."

This reply was delivered in a way that finally closed the conversation, and Sophia never dared again allude to the subject.

December drew to its close, and she saw that her mother was more and more declining in strength, and that even her insatiable appetite for the world itself was departing. She no longer cared to hear the talk of the town. Her beloved Morning Post would lie day after day unopened. The little meals, which she used to take with the eagerness of one who is determined to overcome illness, were now languidly put aside to another hour. She slept more frequently, and everything showed plainly that she was quitting the stage of the world, where, a popular actress indeed, she had so long and so brilliantly figured.

CHAPTER III.

SOPHIA HAS THREE COUNSELORS.

Nor was poor Sophia left alone with her sorrow. We have all friends in this world—some who wish us well, and some who wish us nothing of the kind. Ill wishers and well wishers sometimes are equals in making us uneasy. And thus it was with Sophia, for while she was shut up with her mother in the sick house various persons found opportunity to disturb her with counsel or warning. The indefatigable Mrs. Hands, who had fully made up her mind that the young woman must and should marry young John Done, managed to work her way into the house several times. Sophia now feared and hated the widow in equal parts, although she could not deny that, in telling her the truth about Percival, she had acted the part of a friend.

"My dear Sophia," this energetic dame said, "I hear that Brent is coming home—bankrupt, they say; character and cash gone! I should like to see you comfortably settled before that time, and in a position to treat him as he deserves. Now, while your mother is still living, and able to be comforted, settle yourself, Sophia, settle yourself. My dear, *I* know one young man, at least, who would be at your feet in an hour after the time I told him there was a hope that you would change your mind and say 'yes.' I know the young man."

"Thank you," Sophia replied, hastily. Her cheeks were on fire at the bare idea of seeing Percival again. "I shall stay with mamma to the last; and I am not going to marry any one."

"Certainly not a man who has treated you badly," the widow said, resolved to pledge Sophia to this much, at least.

"I am not going to marry anybody," Sophia repeated, tartly.

She had another counselor. Egerton, having heard that Percival was returning, ventured to advise Sophia on the whole subject.

"It is not his being a little wild, Sophia, that I would so much object to," he said. "We are all that sometimes. I mean all young fellows, not girls, though I said 'we.' I had what we call an affair with Miss Johnson at that glove shop myself many years ago, and it went so far that once or twice were on the point of going out walking together, and all that sort of thing—you know what I mean, Sophia; but it was the time for the equinoctial gales, and the weather got unsettled and that stopped it; and then I got engaged to Caroline, and she was such a tremendously fine girl that she steadied me. I don't want to find fault with Percival Brent, who is not half a bad fellow, I think. But you are not the woman for him, Sophia, that is where it is—you are not the woman for him. In every case a woman ought to be the woman for a man. A man of Percival's sort ought to be engaged to a woman with a whip in her hand. Some of us—I mean the fellows with 'go'—want to be influenced, and things to be brought to bear on us, and we want forcible feminine character about us, and the rest of it, and in such cases there is nothing like a woman with a whip in her hand."

More solemn and weighty words were addressed to the poor heart-sick girl. Goldmore no sooner heard that Percival was coming back than he became sincerely alarmed for Sophia's future.

"I tremble for that girl," he said to his wife one morning, "kind, impressible, virtuous as she is. I wish she would accept Prendergast, who is as much in love with her as ever, and to whom fortune will make no difference. I fear—I very greatly fear—that Sophia will be very poor at her mother's death. Everything points that way. But she is the sweetest of girls," he added in tones of solemn approval; "she is a sister you may well be proud of, and she shall never want a brother while I live, Sibyl. She shall live here if she will make this house her home."

"I don't know that Sophy would care to live here," Sibyl answered curtly. "She is fanciful and quixotic. Perhaps she will marry Percival Brent after all."

"Not after his improper behavior," Goldmore remarked, with the solemn morality of a Great Briton.

Sibyl laughed a little. "Women forgive that sometimes," she said.

Accordingly Goldmore, in fear of something which he could not quite define to himself, resolved to give Sophia the benefit of his experience of life. His kindness and his good intentions were undoubted, and his words were those of a man who "knows."

"Don't be deceived by that soft forgiving heart of yours into marrying a profligate, Sophia," he said. "A young man may fall into many errors and come out of them, and be as good as ever, but a profligate never returns to the state of his youth. He may seem respectable, but he is never truly restored. He has lost that which he can never regain. There will always be a hardness and a coldness about him, and he may any hour relapse into evil ways. Such men make a pretense of reforming when they want to marry, and perhaps even believe themselves reformed; but, Sophia, a profligate can no more reform and be what once he was than a man who has lost an eye can see again as perfectly as when he had two. Be firm, Sophia! Be true to yourself. Hear nothing the young man says."

Poor Sophia began to cry.

"I am not saying this thoughtlessly, my dear girl," Goldmore continued, taking her hand. "I admire a young woman who loves a man and will make a sacrifice for him, and I may take the liberty of assuring you, Sophia (so great is my interest in you), that I had resolved, had the young man been honorable, that no little difficulty of a pecuniary kind should have stood in your way. But now, Sophia," Goldmore said, with all the magnate upon him once more, "I must interfere in quite another sort of way."

Late that night, when weary Sophia stole back to her mother's room, she found it dark, for the lamp had gone out.

"Are you awake, mamma?"

"Is that you, Sophia?" the old woman answered, in a clear and singularly collected voice. "That girl in blue is here again, you see."

"What, mamma? Where?"

"Here, at the end of the bed, and that young fellow with her. They have been dancing, and came here afterward. They have not spoken to me, not a word. Only they sit there kissing and laughing. I don't object to laughing or kissing either; only they should not choose this place, where so many people are passing up and down. But, Lord! how young people will go on!"

Time after time during several days the old woman would imagine that the bedroom was a ballroom, and that the girl in blue and her lover were sitting at her bed's end, flirting and misbehaving themselves in a way which tickled the old woman; for she often laughed aloud, and said over and over again: "Lord! how young people will go on!"

At last, on Christmas eve, Sophia was sitting beside her, and she spoke all at once in a low, penetrating whisper:

"Sophy, I know who that girl is now."

"Who, mamma?"

"*Myself, dear—myself.*" She uttered this in a whisper of secrecy, low, but intensely clear. "I saw the face just this moment. And that is Jack Dallimore—'Spider,' we used to call him, he was so thin; but he was clever and so handsome! We stole out